

THE "NORTH" IN CANADIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

By


W.L. Morton, F.R.S.C.

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## The "North" in Canadian Historiography†

This paper attempts two things. One is to suggest how the area and condition loosely called the "North" by Canadians has affected the development of all Canada. The other is to advance the proposition that any satisfactory interpretation of Canadian history must include the influence of the "North" on Canadian history. The latter proposition implies, as it is meant to do, that no scheme of Canadian historiography yet advanced is wholly satisfactory because none as yet takes account of the influence of the "North." Canadian awareness of Canada is the poorer for that lack, as is the significance of Canada in the world.

The "North," of course, in common usage and in literature is not a scientific term; it remains at best vague and even ambiguous. Precise definitions do exist, but they are precise because limited in purpose. Every man and every scientist has his own "North." The "North" of this paper must therefore be defined for the purpose of the paper. The North is exceedingly cold, as measured by the needs of living plants and animals, for most of the year. The frost-free period, if any, is too brief to allow the growth of cereal foods. In terms of that greater part of human history which has rested on the cultivation of cereals, the North therefore does not admit of agricultural settlement.

The North is thus a climatic environment. In the North, environment is a fact of life and a factor in historiography, whatever may be thought of the influence of environment in the historiography of other regions. The North will admit of an extreme form of nomadic living; witness the Eskimo. It admits also of what may be termed an extreme form of urban

\* Department of History, Trent University.

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life: witness, say, Schefferville in northern Quebec, or still more the urban forms adapted to the North which architects have planned. Life is possible in the North, but ever and always on the conditions imposed by it. To say this is, perhaps, to differ with Stefannson's contention that man can live on the country. Stefannson, like the Eskimo, proved his contention, but he wisely refrained from saying how *many* men.

The answer, of course, exists in any head count of northern population. A hunter, however skilled, can support few people. The present population of the North is supported, at a price, by means of transport developed in more favourable regions. It follows that the development of the North, whether of its old hunting economy or its new mining economy, has depended and will depend on high skills or high costs. Both are the toll the North exacts. The development of the North, therefore, has its own characteristics, different in quality, scale, and sociology from the historic development, agricultural and industrial, of southern regions. Population in the North will be concentrated; it will be made up mostly of transient residents; it will rest on dwindling resources. To some degree a northern community resembles a human outpost on the moon or Mars more than one in the south.

If that is so, one must ask what institutions and what cultural life such communities will have. Of one thing it is possible to be sure; they will be as like those of the south as may be. Man may change his latitudes easily enough, but he does not readily change his ways. It seems unlikely, however, that either institutions or culture can be, as they have not been in the past in many significant ways, like those that history has evolved in more favourable regions. Schefferville, or Thompson, is outwardly at least like any town in the south. Innuvik, much farther to the north, is not. A domed city, or a sunken city on a southern hill slope, would undoubtedly require a more regulated, more repressed life than, say, that of Peterborough or Winnipeg. Would it be so much different that new forms of city government and new ways of living would come into being? Would the northern environment press even under the domes, even into the subtly coloured wall-to-wall carpeted living-rooms of Oilmansville, Banks Island? It is my expectation that it would.

To sum up, then, by the "North" is meant all that territory beyond the line of minimal growth of the known cereal grains. To the northern developer, of course, such a line is meaningless, but it does seem to have meaning in historical perspective, however quickly that perspective may be lengthening, because the society we know, southern society, is an urban society resting on an agricultural base. In the North there can be no such base for living. A northern society, other than that resting on the hunting economy of the Eskimo, clearly must be a society projected into an alien environment, a society in orbit.

The character of the North, then, is firm, decisive, and different from that of the south. Has that character, however, notably affected the historical development of Canada as evidenced today? It is my impression that, on the one hand, it has affected that development, in ways I shall attempt to sketch, and that, on the other hand, it has not been generally incorporated into Canadian history as it is understood. Hence the thesis of these remarks, that this country, in so far as it is distinctive, is a response to the character and influence of the North. To the extent that it has failed, Canadian historiography so far is incomplete and insufficient.

That there should be a hiatus between the history of exploration, with which so much of the historical literature and documents of Canadian historiography have to do, and Canadian history as actually written is not surprising. Much of that history is in one sense not Canadian at all; the voyages of Hudson, Cook, and Franklin are more truly part of British maritime history. The great inland explorations of Champlain, La Vérendrye, Hearne, Mackenzie, and Thompson, properly understood, are not really Canadian either. They are part of French imperial history, or of economic history pure and simple. It is even more difficult to bring the scant history of the North into Canadian historiography. The antiquity of the Northmen's ventures, the lack of hard evidence, the very differences of language, necessarily make the ancient voyages seem at best mere marginalia to an essentially different story. When a former colleague of mine, and a late member of the Royal Society of Canada, Trygvi Oleson, attempted to argue that what had indubitably happened in Greenland, a mingling of people and culture in the North, might also have happened in the Canadian Arctic, he was met with disbelief and rejection. Yet, if the argument attempted here has any validity, Oleson was right in that his argument accorded with the fundamental pattern of Canadian history. What happened beyond reasonable doubt in Canadian history as accepted happened also in the North, because the North is an integral part of Canadian history. Both the contacts of the Northmen and the explorations of the seamen and the explorers were part of Canadian history because they were part of the process of learning and adaptation to the conditions of the North. That some were failures which left no mark is irrelevant; failure is part of success in learning and adaptation.

The fur trade may seem different, and indeed it is not to be dismissed as just economic history. Money made in the fur trade went into the founding of the Bank of Montreal and the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Behind the foundation of many of our cities lies a "moccasin ring" of greater or less proportions. Indeed most Canadian cities began as convenient places to grubstake a fur trader, a fisherman, or a miner, or to fit out a settler. Yet the fur trade had an essential character that may be called "northern," even if it revealed elements of that



character also in the Carolinas and the Florida Everglades. That was the adaptation of European commercial enterprise to the exploitation of the only readily available resources of the wilderness. Hence it was also a learning of wilderness ways, of dependence on Indian inventions and skills and the use of lands not yet, if ever, habitable. The elements of northern development are discernible in the fur trade of the south.

The history of the fur trade, to some degree, stands apart from Canadian historical development. At most it gathered capital, explored the land, and opened the ways to settlement. But it did these things only in part, in southern Ontario not at all. For that reason, although it forms the backbone of the interpretation of Canada history attributed to Harold Innis, it is unconvincing today as the groundwork for the interpretation of accepted Canadian history. The fur trade depended on the wilderness; where the settler, as used to be said, tamed the wilderness, that is, destroyed it, the fur trade retreated with the wilderness, leaving only some half-breed offspring in place of the beaver, a multitude of place names, and Lower Fort Garry.

An implication of the above remarks, and it is intended, is that the accepted history of Canada begins with settlement. (A second implication today, and it is recognized here, is that agricultural settlement leads to urban foundations. This is, in fact, partly fallacious. A good case can be made that the urban foundations preceded settlement; that, in short, Canadian history was metropolitan from its beginnings.) The belief that there could be no history without a farmer to begin it is touchingly revealed in the respect given Louis Hébert and Abraham Martin in the older histories of New France. But the bucolic inclination persists even today. It is this preoccupation with settlement that explains why the North has little, if any, part in accepted Canadian history, and has not been incorporated as yet in Canadian historiography. The North rejects the farmer. If without the farmer there can be no history, it follows that there can be no northern history, and consequently no place for the North in Canadian historiography.

It is not correct, however, to infer that, because the North as here defined is the region where agriculture is impossible, it has not affected Canadian agricultural settlement, and therefore has no place in Canadian historiography. The northern character of the greater part of Canadian territory may not have made agriculture impossible in the remainder of the country. It did, however, limit the character and extent of that agriculture, often severely. The Yankee farmer who told Captain Butler he would not go to Canada because "you cawn't grow cawrn crop up there" may well have explained why there is a Canada. Farming Canada is and always has been at best spring, not winter, wheat, much less corn, country. Only a few very favoured regions, the Annapolis Valley, southwestern old On-

tario, the Okanagan and lower Fraser valleys can safely add orchard to field crops. The North has restricted the diversity, if not the abundance of the Canadian farm in almost every corner of the country, and acted as a limitation, if not a prohibition.

The North as defined, moreover, has created another definite feature of the Canadian landscape. As the agricultural frontier moved westward, it left an open flank to the north. This became a permanent frontier, an enduring demarcation line between wilderness and farmland, between north and south. Ragged, flexible, moving far north in the far northwest, it is nevertheless an impenetrable as well as a permanent frontier. It may be vaulted; it cannot be removed. The importance of this will be elaborated below.

If, then, the North affected even agricultural settlement in Canada, and is therefore part of Canadian history and ought to be part of Canadian historiography, can the same be said to any significant degree of Canadian urban settlement? This matter depends upon whether one thinks of urban settlement as growing out of agricultural settlement, or as having independent origins of its own. As I have already suggested, it is notable that in Canadian history the beginnings of our chief cities, Halifax, Quebec, Montreal, for example, antedated agricultural settlement. The last was particularly a place of assembly for trade in its origin and nothing more. In some sense that suggests that there could have been a Canada and Canadian history without any agricultural settlement, as is indeed the case in Newfoundland. The city in itself, the metropolis dependent, not on the riches of its neighbourhood, but on the reach of its commerce over areas of trading, whether extensive or intensive, does not need its own local food supply.

Were such cities, or, to put it another way, Canadian cities both metropolitan and local, in any way affected by the Canadian North? One possible answer is affirmative in so far as metropolitan Canadian cities, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Vancouver, have been dependent on extensive trade, as all have been, and in so far as the "North" is to be equated with extensive trade, those cities have been affected by it. But has the North as defined affected all cities, both metropolitan and local, in any significant way? It would seem not, except in the ways all areas of Canadian life, urban as well as rural, are affected by long winters and low temperatures.

Some deeper analysis, however, suggests that the North has also affected the Canadian city as it did the Canadian farm. The essential features of the city are integration of function (an intensive division of labour) and concentration of site, to ensure ready communication. To these are added the concomitants of size and duration. Now the city so defined is compatible with the North as defined, and we have in fact such cities as Yel-



lowknife, Flin Flon, Schefferville, Wabush, and Labrador City to establish the point. On the first and last points, however, the North does affect cities in the north. They do not have an integration of function as extensive as that of cities in the south, because they all rest on a single economic base, mining. Since there is as yet no apparent reason for carrying on general manufacturing in the North, that limitation is likely to persist. What then of the last point, duration? The future of such cities is of course limited, and I am not altogether sure of the engineer's solution of the resultant problem, to move or abandon them. A mining town or village, yes, but a city in its nature demands a deeper commitment of its people, and will strive to survive.

The city, then, is limited by the North in integration and duration. Have all Canadian cities, if in less degree, been so limited? The matter would require great study before any confident answer could be given. Yet it is surely "yes." Only consider how few Canadian cities, Victoria in part excepted, have any real *outdoor* urban life. In the favoured cities of the world the life of the street, the park, the plaza, create their social character, and indeed make them endurable for the poor. In the winter Canadian cities are chiefly shelters, and in summer all who can flee them for as long as possible. (In summer the Canadian city is southern indeed, its pavements baking under the long northern sun.) Toronto may be the cultural centre of English Canada, but I live by a highway which every summer Friday evening is choked by people escaping from its heat. Winnipeg may have its Royal Ballet, but one goes to it through the arctic cold of Portage and Main.

More seriously, I suspect the grave and cautious men of business take note of the limitations the North places on most Canadian cities; the engineers certainly do when they plan the factory buildings and the warehouses. And in sum I think we may assume that the North has limited the characteristics of the city, both metropolitan and local, in Canada.

To say so is not to escape the uneasy feeling that one has belaboured the obvious. The North is cold, and cold limits plant growth and certain of man's activities; so much does not have to be established. My purpose, however, does have a certain subtlety. Canadians behave, and Canadian historians write, as though the North did not exist. My intent is not only to affirm that the North exists, but to assert that it is and has been a very active part of Canadian history and should be taken into account in Canadian historiography.

What emerges, I believe, is that the North not only creates a permanent frontier but in Canada it further imposes beyond that line the breakdown of all conventional and historic institutions. New ones may be invented, old ones modified, but the North begins along the line of institutional



breakdown: its influence operates below that line not by breakdown, but by limitation.

Certain other factors, individual and sociological, must also be taken into account in a way different from that in which settlement, rural and urban, has been taken into account in this paper. It may be sufficient to say of Canadian agrarian and city life that the North has affected them by limiting their extent. It is not sufficient to say no more of the effect of the North on individual Canadians. Here the effect, if it is to be significant, must be an effect not only on extent but also on quality. One could argue, for example, that the North has in some ways extended the good life in Canada by giving winter as well as summer sports, or by furnishing that contrast of civilization and wilderness, the result of the permanent frontier in Canada, which underlies the lakeside cottage life, one of the fondest aspects of the lives of many Canadians. If the North, however, had no further effect on Canadians, the argument advanced here would be gravely weakened, if indeed it could stand at all.

On this important point, nevertheless, I must speak with circumspection. Some of my colleagues in this symposium have spoken, or will speak, on this theme of the Canadian experience. Moreover, in approaching it at all, I must emphasize that I do not raise, indeed I repudiate, any thought of the North producing, peace to Robert W. Service, a hardy breed of man. Any influence the North may have had on Canadian life is, for this paper, an objective matter. The influence may have been moral, or immoral, or amoral; which it is, for the purpose of these remarks, is indifferent.

With those reservations made, may I have your indulgence to take up the theme exclusively as a historian? That is, I shall attempt to see what influence the North may have had on the lives of Canadians overtime and in terms of change. As historian, I see four areas in which the historical influence of the North may be discerned. One is the contact of cultures, American Indian and European; the second, that of customs and conventions; the third, already touched on, industrial development; the fourth, institutional.

On all but the fourth, comment of any weight is difficult. With respect to the first, for example, it is well known that the European greatly affected the Indian, and the Indian the European to some degree, perhaps in some ways not yet recognized. But what had the North to do with the matter? In attempting an answer, I discard *castor gras* and the thicker furs of the northern forest, even the four-point blanket. What the North did in a degree ever greater with increasing latitude was force the European to live among the Indians. The most evident result of this intermingling was intermarriage, and the most lasting result the half-breed or *métis* of Canadian history and Canadian life. The *métis*, after all, are not to be lightly

dismissed, although Canadians are prone to do so. They were the only Canadians to bring off a successful rebellion, and the province of Manitoba was the result. Less noted is the fact that the importance of the half-breed is that he makes this country significantly unlike the United States in an important sociological aspect, and makes it in this respect akin rather to nearly all the countries of Latin America.

I think that point might be developed, but I pass on to the next, that of customs and conventions. Is the pattern of Canadian life in any way affected by the North? It is even more difficult to say. I suspect that the Canadian belief that alcohol "keeps out the cold" was imported; at any rate I shall forbear to say that the North has helped make us the serious drinkers that we are. There is, however, one custom and one convention common to all Canadians, French and English, new and old, that points to the influence of the North. I do not mean the practice of going south of the border as fast and often as possible. The custom is that Canadians *do* something about the weather. That sounds a bit Leacockian, but I mean it literally. Some Americans, New Englanders and Dakotans, join us in this. But for Canadians doing something about the weather is both an annual ritual and a serious business, like the daily siesta of southerners. The purchase of winter or summer clothing, the changing of tires, the fitting on of the storm sash and the taking off – how shall I enumerate the varieties of the custom, persisting even in the great cities, if in reverse, the provision of humidifiers and electric fans, or ultraviolet lamps, the cultivation of the African violet and the dwarf cacti? And the convention? The convention of Canadian life is to ignore the North as we ignore the winter climate in our history, or literature, and so far as we physically may in our daily lives. We ignore the North, its coldness, its emptiness, its menace, and its promise – why? Because it is too terrible; it is a terror only some of us, those who live "down North," have exorcized and tamed.

So emerges my theme. All Canadian historians, such is my proposition, must go down North and ask themselves, ask themselves, of course, in addition to all the other questions they have raised, what the North has meant in Canadian history.

What has it meant? Has it meant more than a cold climate? How indeed can something which is after all only a freezing emptiness, an arctic void, a blizzard-swept desert, a silent space, dark as the other side of the moon half of each year, mean anything at all?

The first thing to be grasped is that even a vacuum has meaning. Even if the North were as empty as our rhetoric makes it, it would still exert an influence. Ours after all is the age in which the negative has become as active as the positive. What being responsible for a wilderness unoccupied and practically unpoliced, the voyages of the *Manhattan* have made clear.



For both economics and politics abhor a vacuum and, if Canada does not occupy and develop its North, someone else will.

This is true in fact today, but it has always been potentially true. If the French sought the way to China by the St Lawrence, the English, and the Danes, sought it by the North-West Passage, by the *Manhattan's* arctic route, and sought it as long ago as 1585, if not 1506. Hence the fighting along the shores and on the waters of Hudson Bay. If, however, explorers like Hudson hoped the North might be empty water free all the way to Asia, it was, in fact, not empty of certain desired commodities, fur, seal and whale oil, eider, ivory, the product of the rich marine life which fed along the margins of its ice. These things it was that brought the first Europeans, seeking timber too, Siberian driftwood if necessary, for roof trees and boat-building; these it was that made America a halfway house to Asia to men who lived in a newly global world as we live in a newly planetary one. One historiographical result was that Canada had its own historical beginnings, not in the late Columbian voyages, but in the early Icelandic ones.

If, however, the North is in these small ways a significant factor in Canadian history, is it also more? Does it not only limit the bounds of the Canadian historical enterprise, but also qualify it so as to give Canadian historiography a yet further distinctive quality of its own? I think it does, and here I go beyond anything I have ventured to say before.

By historiography I mean here the way the history of a particular subject has been interpreted. In the history of Canada four such interpretations may be discussed, both in the past and as being more or less active today. The first is that of the mission of New France to extend and preserve the Catholic faith and French culture in North America. The second interprets Canadian history as the victorious spread of British institutions, in the Canadian variant of responsible government, on Canadian soil. The third is the Laurentian thesis that Canada is the child of its rivers, reincarnated in its railways. The fourth and latest is that of the concept of the metropolis, general and local, as the key to the explanation of Canadian history. The exponents of none of these was, or is, thinking of historiography as he wrote, or writes; none would claim that his interpretation, at least so narrowly defined, was complete, or aimed at completeness. To me all four seem to possess validity; all seem at the same time to be limited.

All, moreover, actually if not intentionally, do not encompass the North. Harold Innis, of course, was fully aware of the North, but saw it only as an extension of Canada. He did not see the permanent frontier which the existence of the North created once the great fur trade ended. Donald Creighton is aware of the North, but his triumphant goal, like Canada's and Macdonald's, was the Pacific, and the last notes of his majestic sym-

phony are the clink of Donald A. Smith's hammer on the last spike in the mountain silence of Craigellachie. The North is yet to be incorporated into the historiography of Canada.

In fact this will not be done until much professional historical work has been done on the North, work such as Professor Morris Zaslow has now in manuscript. In theory, however, it is clear how it will be done. First, the North is common to all Canada, except the three Maritime Provinces. (I hate to make the exception, but the lack of the North is one of the disadvantages of those provinces.) Next, it almost alone gives the federal government a clear and positive role to play; in the North its empire remains and its future may reside. Finally, the North is and has been a constant, if largely unrecognized factor in Canadian history, a factor even as a void, a factor as a breeder of weather, as a source of treasure, perhaps as a reservoir of clean air in a globe polluted, the last pillar of the biosphere. As such it will enter the consciousness of Canadians – how much it has done in the last year! – and the work of Canadian historians. As it does, we shall come to see that the historiography of Canada includes not only the advance by the St Lawrence but also the unfolding of the permanent frontier, clear as the line between the desert and the sower on the plain of Damascus, beyond which all conventional institutions break down, beyond which life and wealth are possible, but only on the North's conditions.

In that I see the symbolic meaning of Canadian history. Not only in the North, but in nearly all Canada, life and wealth are possible only on the North's conditions. The North makes necessary an absolute dependence on one's fellows, on cooperative skills, on communal capital. So, in ever lessening degrees southward, does southern Canada. In the North the average does not govern; the extremes do. So, in degrees ever dwindling southward, do they in the south.

I conclude, therefore, with a paradox: the ultimate and the comprehensive meaning of Canadian history is to be found where there has been no Canadian history, in the North.



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